



# PERIMETERS in PARAGRAPHS



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## BURMA

Early in April, 1942, British and Chinese forces held a line extending east and west through Prome and Toungoo. The British covered the Irrawaddy valley with the Imperial and India Divisions, the Chinese the Sittang Valley with their 6th Army.

The British had been fighting since January and were battle worn. After every engagement they had retreated; their morale had suffered. When they lost Rangoon on March 8th they lost their base, and thereafter could obtain no more supplies and ammunition other than limited quantities sent by air from India. Burma south of the British line contains the great rice areas which are the most productive in the world, but the country to the north as far as Mandalay was poor, sparsely settled, producing oil, peanuts, and cotton, little food, and no military supplies other than oil.

British headquarters at Mandalay decided to withdraw the troops to the vicinity of that city. There was another food zone north of Mandalay, and it would simplify supply problems to have the troops nearby; it would also be better for the Chinese troops, whose line of communications extended through Mandalay and Lashio into China.

The British were commanded by General Harold R. L. G. Alexander, a four-star general recently promoted who considered himself by reason of seniority as commanding all United Nations' troops in Burma. The Chinese "army" had about 15,000 men but little artillery, no tanks, no mechanized equipment, and few technical services. The "army" as a combat unit was inferior to a Japanese infantry division.

The Japanese were believed to have three divisions in Burma, of which two were in line and one in corps reserve near Rangoon. All divisions were mechanized, and were supported by a strong air force and gunboats on the Irrawaddy River. The Allies had no gunboats and but few planes.

The territory to be traversed in the proposed retreat was generally barren and nearly treeless, covered with scrub about two to two and a half feet high which gave cover to deployed infantry but none to vehicles and guns. Main roads were not near rivers and there was little water elsewhere. Roads were unpaved and dusty; in the hot,

tropical sun marches were exhausting. Through this inhospitable country the retreat started, properly covered by rear guards. As expected, the enemy followed so closely there were daily rear-guard actions. The total distance to be covered was around 400 miles.

On April 3d the Japanese bombed Mandalay in a severe four-hour attack. Great fires broke out, depots (especially of food) were destroyed, and about 2,000 people were killed and 6,000 wounded. Mandalay was left a city of crumpled palaces and wrecked bazaars. In addition to being military headquarters, it was also the capital with the usual administration centers; civilian employees were mostly natives, who considered the bombing ample excuse for quitting their jobs and fled, thus disrupting all official business. Similarly the railroad employees and truck drivers left their posts, so for some time it was impossible to forward supplies to the troops, still far to the south. Large numbers of citizens jammed the roads, fleeing on bicycles, buffalo carts, automobiles, on foot, any way at all. Some were infected with cholera and other communicable diseases, or wounded and in need of care.

On April 5th Generalissimo and Mrs. Chiang Kai-Chek arrived at Lashio by plane. The General and his party proceeded next morning to Maymyo, about 40 miles north of Mandalay, where the American Baptist mission and British Country Club were operating as usual. A conference was held between General Chiang, Lieut. Gen. Joseph W. Stilwell of the U. S. Army, General Alexander commanding the British forces, and various Chinese generals; Mme. Chiang participated as interpreter.

General Chiang announced that he was there in his capacity of Generalissimo, to which office he had been appointed on January 3d by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill, sitting jointly in Washington. According to the Washington communique issued at that time, his authority extended over

**"all land and air forces of the United Nations which are now, or may in the future be, operating in the Chinese theater, including initially such portions of Indo-China and Thailand as may become available to troops of the United Nations."**

He had heard that some, particularly his own Chinese generals, were in doubt as to who was in command in Burma—Stilwell or Alexander. He now wished to make it plain that he was *Generalissimo*, that he and nobody else was in command. He had assigned General Stilwell to command the Chinese troops in Burma, reporting directly to him, and he similarly looked upon General Alexander to command the British troops. It was agreed that the British should operate on the west part of the front, the Chinese on the east. Arrangements were further made to make Chinese detachments available to reopen the railroad, temporarily halted by lack of employees. Somehow, possibly through the "fifth column," the Japanese decided to bomb Maymyo that very afternoon; the conference broke up, its members rushing for the golf course to take advantage of its cover. No important persons were injured, but among the humble people 40 were killed and 40 injured.



British Newsreel

During the day Mrs. Chiang Kai-Chek drove to Mandalay to see the ruins of the now nearly-deserted city. It was not a pleasant sight, for the dead were still in the streets; it was contrary to native religious ideas to bury the dead except by special castes, not now to be found. In the great heat, sanitary conditions were bad.

Next morning General Chiang and his party returned to Lashio. Just as they arrived, so did reliable information that the enemy air force was coming north. More "fifth column" stuff. There being no reason to stay longer at Lashio, General and Mrs. Chiang promptly disappeared over the high mountains to the north. The local staff just had time to reach cover in the adjacent hills before the Japanese planes duly arrived and savagely bombed the town.

Thereafter the Chinese and British armies operated in liaison. General Alexander frequently complained that he was unable to find out what the Chinese army was doing, except by reading the newspapers publishing the Chungking communiques. General Stilwell reported daily

to Chungking, and General Alexander to superior British authority.

Until April 16th the retreat of British and Chinese forces proceeded without special incident. The British were then approaching Yenangyaung on the Irrawaddy and the Chinese were across the mountains in the Sittang valley on about the same line. They were in the oil country, and in accordance with prescribed "scorched earth" policy demolition details were in Yenangyaung that afternoon to destroy the power plant, oil wells, pumps, and similar objectives. One of the last places scheduled to be demolished was the ice plant, north of the town; when the detail approached, it was fired on by Japs in the plant. How they got there nobody knew, but they were there! Patrols were sent out and discovered a line of hostile troops stretching east and west across the only two roads leading north from Yenangyaung, on the far side of a stream flowing into the Irrawaddy; attempts to approach the enemy met strong machine gun fire. The retreat was at once stopped, and the commanding general notified of the situation. Night was falling.

The general opinion was that the enemy had circled around the British on both flanks, but later it appeared that he had arrived by boat and had also landed troops on the west side of the Irrawaddy. The British found Japanese to the south, west, and north; there were neither roads nor trails leading east, so every exit was in enemy hands. The CG decided to wait until morning before making any decision. The main body was turned off south of Yenangyaung, and billeting areas assigned for the night.

The troops had marched 25 miles that day under a blazing sun in waterless country. They were exhausted and considerably mixed up, trains, artillery, infantry, animals. Everyone was covered with dust. The men were crying aloud for water. The rear guard had had some wounded, and no transportation for these.

On the morning of the 17th the CG decided to break through to the north. Reconnaissances were ordered to locate the enemy's exact position and best lines of approach thereto. There were oil derricks all through this country, and in some of them the Japs had OP's. The country was covered with the usual low scrub, which gave no cover to the artillery or to troop movements. Deep dust everywhere. No water, and very, very hot. Reconnaissance parties reported that the enemy had dug in along the far bank of the Piu Chang, where he had a strong line with numerous machine guns and mortars; prospects of an attack were not so good.

An SOS was sent to the Chinese in the Sittang valley to come and attack the enemy on the following morning from beyond his position, driving south. At the same hour the British would attack from the south. The Chinese expressed misgivings that the British troops would mistake them for the enemy should they come; on being assured that this would certainly be avoided, they agreed

to come. British officers explained to the infantry how to tell a Chinaman from a Jap; all had the plan explained, and all were cautioned to be on the lookout for their China comrades.

During the day enemy planes harassed the British frequently without air opposition, so in the absence of cover the artillery and trains had to move constantly to avoid destruction. It was very tiring. Water was available from the river, but as the supply line was cut no rations arrived. A reduced rice ration was all G-4 could issue. The last ammunition was issued. Some ravines leading to the Irrawaddy were found to offer some cover, and in the afternoon the troops crowded into them; when the movement was ordered, tanks, guns, trains, men, animals all rushed in at once, choking with dust, suffocating from the heat.

On the 18th, troops formed before dawn for the breakthrough to the north; the usual rear guard kept off the enemy from the south. If the attack was successful, the trains would rush through to the north, followed by the combat elements in usual rear-guard formation.

Nothing happened during the entire morning. The deployed troops sweltered in the broiling sun and exhausted the water in their canteens, but no Chinese appeared. Finally word came that the Chinese would be ready at noon; they requested some sign that the British would support their attack. So promptly at noon the artillery fired a five-minute preparation. Due to shortage of ammunition it could not last longer, but nothing at all then happened; everybody waited for someone else. At 12:35 PM Chinese machine guns and infantry mortars opened fire, whereupon the British artillery resumed fire. Soon the British attack started, the soldiers dog tired, out of water, exhausted. No progress. At 1:30 the attack was discontinued and the tanks were ordered to start a new attack going over a little trail to the east; infantry were to follow. No one knew where the trail went but it was headed in the right direction to lead around the enemy's left.

This attack was not ready until 4:00 PM. Once more the artillery fired a preparation against supposed locations of enemy machine guns and mortars. The tanks got away, infantry jeeps following at a reasonable distance. The tanks dashed down slopes to the small stream, found little opposition, got across, and swung up on the far side to a small plateau—where the trail ended! The trains had been waiting all day and when they saw that the tanks and jeeps had apparently broken through they followed. Soon the small plateau became jammed with trucks, bull carts, Scotch infantry, batteries, Indian troops, field hospitals, trains. Incidentally it was now found that

the enemy was encircling the plateau.

The senior officer present, a brigadier, consulted with the chief of staff who had gone forward; they decided it was too late to break through today, and the troops were ordered back to their billets. The CG radioed to Mandalay, "Position desperate," and General Alexander replied that the attack to break through must be renewed in the morning, and that not only the troops but the trains must be saved. The troops got next to no food this night. There was little ammunition left. It was found that the enemy was being reinforced by a stream of gunboats and steel barges operating on the Irrawaddy.

Next morning, the 19th, the agreed plan was that the Chinese would attack at 4:00 AM going south, following the two roads as axes. The British were to follow the same roads, but going north and starting at 6:00 AM. Everybody was late. The Chinese attack started at 6:10 and could of course be heard by the British, who started their attack at 7:00. Once more the tanks swept forward along the two roads, to find that the Japanese now had light artillery. With OP's in oil derricks, it stopped the tanks, and machine guns and snipers (also 'way up in derrick tops) took toll of the infantry. Remember, there was no cover except the two-foot scrub.

The last food had been eaten for a meager breakfast. Water in canteens was becoming exhausted. It was dreadfully hot—no shade of course. A new attack was ordered for 9:00 AM, and this time the tanks got across the small stream but were then promptly put out by enemy artillery. As this could not be seen from the south side, the trains thinking the way had been opened dashed forward into the stream. Japanese mortars fired



British Press Service

into the column. Tanks, ambulances, trucks, became blazing wrecks, and the road was now more blocked than ever.

By 11:00 o'clock the attack had failed. Men were panting. Someone noted a pipe line across the battlefield coming from oil wells. It was presumed to contain oil, but a genius took a chance and fired his rifle into it. Water gushed out immediately in a strong stream. Details were made, new holes shot into the pipe, canteens refilled. The day had been saved.

Around noon the Chinese attack started once more. It was now decided to abandon the roads and try again that old trail to the right. The Royal Yorkshire and the Enniskilling Infantry were properly deployed this time; they started off, and as before they reached the small stream without opposition. Instead of continuing on up to the plateau, the commander changed direction nearly 90° to the left and headed for what he believed from the firing was the Chinese left. He made it. The way out had been found, and the British lost no time in escaping the trap which had so nearly succeeded. But losses in personnel and equipment had been serious.

The retreat north up the Irrawaddy and Sittang valleys was renewed, and during the succeeding days proceeded about as before, with constant rear guard actions. But a new complication arose, unforeseen by the Allies.

On April 17th Japanese forces were reported on the east bank of the Salween River, about due east from Toungoo. No particular attention was at first given them, but on the 21st strong enemy forces were noted around Bawlake and Loikaw. On the 22d this group had reached Hopong (about 10 miles east of Taunggyi); it had mechanized forces, had 40 planes in the air, and was heavily engaged with the Chinese Sixth Army, which detached strong forces to drive back the enemy around Taunggyi. It was *assumed* that the mission of these Japanese was to reach the Sittang River and cut off the retreat to Mandalay, otherwise progressing smoothly by both British and Chinese; in this it now appears they were mistaken.

The Japanese near Taunggyi were a flank guard, covering the movement of about a division completely mechanized which was racing up the valleys parallel to and east of the Sittang toward Lashio. It was indeed a Japanese effort to cut off the Chinese retreat, but the enveloping movement was much larger than either British or Chinese headquarters envisaged. The British were the first to realize the situation: on April 25th they identified the real Japanese advance by air reconnaissance; three hostile columns in as many valleys were disclosed, each followed by long lines of trucks and advancing towards Lashio. The British wasted no time in withdrawing, but the Chinese continued to fight around Taunggyi.

By the 28th the new Japanese advance was on a line with Mandalay and about 50 miles east of it; only minor forces were in front of it. British headquarters decided that Burma could no longer be held. Immediate preparations

were made to abandon and destroy materiel and to withdraw the personnel to India. By this time the British retreat was near the junction of the Irrawaddy and the Chindwin Rivers, both navigable at this season, and was diverted up the Chindwin. The Chinese in the Sittang valley were near Pyawbwe, and continued to fight around Taunggyi.

The British Burma Government evacuated Maymyo, where it had gone from Mandalay. A desperate series of demolitions was initiated, with first attention to bridges in front of the presumed enemy advance, and then to installations, stores, and transportation which must be abandoned and might be of use to the enemy. Lashio, full of lease-lend supplies, was set on fire, while the Chinese garrison was sent south to tear up the roads along which the enemy was coming.

These measures came too late. Advancing nearly 100 miles in one day, the Japanese reached Lashio about 1:00 PM, April 29th. A violent artillery preparation was fired, to which there was no corresponding reply; tanks, armored cars, and planes attacked on a broad front and drove the weak garrison out of both old and new Lashio. A large quantity of lease-lend supplies, which the Japanese state included 1,200 new automobiles nicely parked outside town, fell to the invaders.

On May 1st Japanese troops entered Mandalay without resistance. The Chinese Sixth Army was still far south, fighting that flank guard around Taunggyi. All United Nations resistance collapsed.

As far as can now be ascertained, the Chinese Army disintegrated. General Stilwell left and was next reported on May 4th at Wantho, several hundred miles to the north, from where he escaped to India by marching across the mountains. Units of his Chinese Army went in various directions; they were reported for only a few days and appear to have been destroyed. The British made their last stand at Kalewa on the Chindwin, about 150 miles northwest of Mandalay, on May 13th. Most of the British that escaped from Kalewa were eventually saved. Commencing about April 28th, the RAF, U. S. Air Force, and China Navigation Co. transport planes worked daily on evacuating personnel to India, carrying over 4,000; the balance of the troops, abandoning materiel and transportation, marched across the mountains.

#### COMMENTS

**Allied troops in this campaign appear to have totaled about 32,000 British and 15,000 Chinese. Lieut. Gen. Stilwell after the campaign was over estimated the Japs at between 40,000 and 50,000, so there was not much difference in the strength of the two sides.**

**The Japanese had the advantage of an efficient air force. The Allies had only a few planes, which were employed not on the battlefield but in raids on enemy presumed sensitive points. Japanese planes were regularly present to assist ground troops.**

**The Japanese had superior equipment. They were all mechanized, well led, and outmaneuvered the Allies. Their first maneuver at Yenanguang failed to capture the British army,**

but did inflict serious losses; the second (on Lashio) was a complete success. The Allies failed to foresee the possibilities of the enemy's operations.

Perhaps most of all, the Allies were always on the defensive. The morale of troops suffered by continuous retreats from one position to another, each a little more hopeless than the last. It was useless to announce retreats to "prepared positions" as made

for "strategic" reasons—the troops knew what was going on. They were short of rations, ammunition, clothing, medicines—everything that an army needs. They were cut off from bases. The Japanese had a clear, uninterrupted line of supply, and were helped by Burmese who, wishing to be rid of the white man's rule, were willing to take a chance on the Japanese and actively assisted them.

## THE AXIS INVADES EGYPT

During the past spring, British forces in Egypt were depleted: tank units had gone to Burma, other troops to Singapore, and the Australian Corps had returned to its own country. After the loss of Burma India seemed to be in danger, so a large convoy of troops and supplies from the United States and Great Britain en route to the East, and which normally would have landed in Egypt, was diverted to India. These losses had prevented the British from continuing their Libyan offensive.

Still they had no fear of the known intended Axis offensive, for (according to the speech of Prime Minister Churchill on July 2nd) the British Intelligence Service estimated Rommel's entire force as about 90,000 men, of whom only 50,000 were Germans. Against this the British 8th Army had 100,000 men, giving an overall superiority of 10%, a specific superiority in artillery of 60% and in tanks of 40%, and a "complete superiority"—ratio not stated—in the air. At the proper time a counterattack would be directed against Rommel, which it was hoped would lead to further successes for the cause of the United Nations. This plan failed, as the counterattacks were defeated with a loss of about 70% of the British tank strength, without corresponding loss on the part of the Axis. With the capture of Tobruk on June 21st, involving the loss of 30,000 troops, the British strength dropped materially below that of Rommel's force.

It was therefore decided on June 18th to withdraw the main body of the 8th Army to the frontier between Libya and Egypt, where it would occupy a defensive position (for which the terrain was suitable) pending reorganization and replacements of men and materiel.

Whether or not to leave a garrison in Tobruk had been considered. Lieut. Gen. Ritchie, commanding the 8th Army, received instructions to do so. In a previous siege Tobruk had held out for months, and there was no reason to believe that it would have any difficulty doing so again. It had a large garrison and ample supplies. Its possession would deny its excellent port to the enemy, and it would further block the coast road, which was the only improved road in Libya and over which the Axis supplies would have to come from their present base at Bengazi. As long as Tobruk remained in British hands it seemed probable that Rommel could not muster a sufficiently strong force to overcome the border defense line.

This hope vanished too when at noon on the 21st the British learned that Tobruk had surrendered. It was

presumed that the Axis had probably captured large stocks of food, gasoline, and other supplies which he could immediately use to aid a prompt advance. Indeed, on the very day that Tobruk fell, motorized Axis infantry pushed through Bardia and arrived at Azeiz, only 12 miles northwest from Fort Capuzzo, one of the border defense strong points. Next day Rommel's troops closed in on the British line and were obviously preparing to attack.

Once again the British abandoned their plan. It was considered that it would be too hazardous to accept battle against a victorious and superior enemy on the border with the troops that were available. The British had relatively few armored forces, the enemy had many. The country was open desert to the south, and it would be possible for mechanized troops to move across country and turn the British position. It was decided to withdraw nearly a hundred miles to Matruh, and there establish a line extending from that port south some 40 miles to the west end of the Qattara Depression. Matruh was an intermediate base, and was protected by field fortifications. The Qattara Depression is a below-sea-level area, about 120 miles long from east to west and varying in width from 20 to 50 miles; it is composed of very soft sand, supposed to be impracticable for motor vehicles and consequently impassable for the completely mechanized enemy.

Either side could send turning forces around to the south of the Qattara, but in view of the size of this obstacle, a division of forces into two parts separated by such a large distance would be dangerous to whoever tried it, unless overwhelming strength was available. It was not believed that the Axis had this much strength. The British withdrawal commenced at night, and apparently was not noticed by the Axis.

On June 24th the Axis attacked the border positions at Fort Capuzzo, Solum, and Halfaya Pass. British observation parties retired rapidly, and there being no opposition other than from patrols, the Axis pushed on; by evening they were 50 miles further east at Sidi Barrani, which had been the high-water-mark of the Italian invasion of Egypt in 1940. The British were safely on their new selected line, busily preparing it for defense.

Next day Lieut. Gen. Ritchie was relieved by the British C-in-C in the Middle East, General Sir Claude Auchinleck, who himself assumed command of the 8th

Army in addition to other duties as C-in-C. This change was promptly approved by the home government in London.

On the 26th the Axis pushed forward in three columns, each consisting of one armored division. In order from north to south 15th Panzer Division, 21st Panzer Division, 132nd Ariete Division; they covered a front of some 20 miles. Smaller columns were posted well out on each flank. Combat patrols marched between columns to prevent infiltration. In all, the marching front was around 30 miles.

Among the Axis armored vehicles were noted a number of British, American, and French tanks which had been captured in Libya. Some had been repaired by German and Italian repair units (who had specialized in making repairs *quickly*) and then reissued to German and Italian units. They were now marked with a swastika painted on their tops and flew small flags of appropriate nationality.

On the 27th the Axis attacked the Matruh line, with the main effort well south of that town. A small force of armored vehicles got through the mine fields, pierced the main line of resistance, advanced over twenty-five miles, and then changed direction to head north toward the sea. A small British armored force chased after the enemy but did not catch them before the northward turn. They attacked the enemy's rear in an effort to drive him north and, as this was just the direction the enemy wanted to go, the attack made progress in that the enemy did go north. Later in the afternoon Axis artillery was emplaced on the edge of the escarpment overlooking the narrow coastal plain so they could shell the coast road which was about two miles from the sea. Shortly afterward Axis armored troops with artillery arrived on the road itself and proceeded to block it.

Information of this situation soon reached British headquarters at Matruh. Unless the block could be broken, communication with Alexandria was gone, so the British once more abandoned their plan. It was now decided to give up the Matruh line and retire to a new one to extend from about El Alamein near the sea to the east end of the Quattara Depression. This would also be about a 40 mile line and would be absolutely the last short line resting on impassable obstacles before the vicinity of Alexandria could be reached. A withdrawal of some 100 miles was involved, to begin that very night.

It was first necessary to remove the road block. Troops were sent from Matruh to attack from the west; other troops, which were reinforcements en route from Alexandria, were to attack from the east. As the Axis forces were not strong, the two attacks succeeded and the coast road was reopened.

On June 28th the Axis assigned the capture of Matruh to the Italian XX Corps, and the piercing of the main line of resistance to the German Afrika Corps. The German attack commenced with the removal of mines in

the foreground of the British position by engineers covered by artillery fire and air protection. The German engineers marked off passages through the mine fields as they removed the mines. Some time in the afternoon the work was sufficiently completed for the Panzer Divisions to move forward; protected by strong air bombing and an artillery barrage of great intensity, they went through on a broad front. They went straight forward about 15 miles, then turned north and reached the coast road. Most of the British troops had already withdrawn, however.

While the German attack was being made, the Italian XX Corps attacked Matruh from the west. Later in the day this attack was supplemented by an attack made by the German 90th Motorized Division, which attacked Matruh from the east. The Italians made considerable progress and captured about 6,000 prisoners, mostly from New Zealand. These troops were new, having just arrived as reinforcements for the 8th Army.

British tanks counterattacked the Afrika Corps toward evening, coming up out of the desert to the south. The Germans met this attack only with artillery fire, using their all-purpose 88-mm. batteries as antitank guns. The British attack was stopped, yet it accomplished its purpose of giving the British main body an opportunity to break away for El Alamein.

On the 29th Matruh, the important British depot, with a great quantity of stores which it had been impossible to destroy, fell to a joint attack by Italians from the west and Germans from the east. The Axis took several thousand more prisoners. This sacrifice by the British probably gained them one day for occupation of their new line. The Axis did not arrive before the El Alamein position until two days later.

July opened with the British hastily installed on the El Alamein position. El Alamein consists of a one-building railroad station and about three other houses, out in the middle of the Sahara. From occasional small ridges a wide view of the open desert could be seen. Reinforcements had arrived: in additions to New Zealanders, South African troops withdrawn from line about June 15th for reorganization due to heavy losses which they had incurred were returned to duty; these were seasoned veterans to desert warfare, sunburned and accustomed to torrid days and cold nights.

General Auchinleck had no intention of withdrawing again. He could not, without endangering the great naval base of Alexandria. He knew other reinforcements were on the way. He had also received considerable air troops, including some United States forces. He changed the air mission so as to make its primary objective the crippling of enemy ground troops in action and the destruction of their motor supply trains, with the special object of interfering with the reception in front areas of Diesel oil. Fighter planes and light bombers scoured the desert to locate the huge German

tank trucks with trailers which brought up oil from bases.

July 1st the wind blew strongly and there was a heavy sand storm. Desert sand gets into the eyes, becomes encrusted on the bodies of perspiring men, gums up carburetors, and above all interferes with observation. Both air and ground reconnaissance were out. Taking advantage of this condition, the Axis advanced to the attack. To the Axis Intelligence Service it looked as if the British 8th Army had been decisively beaten. A little more pressure and it would be completely overthrown and the way opened to Alexandria.

Through the sand storm, two strong armored columns advanced between El Alamein and the Qattara Depression. They got on to the British line before they were observed and broke through in several places. Some Axis tanks got into El Alamein and for a moment General Rommel's headquarters thought the battle was won. It was not won. The British sent what tanks they had into the fight. They sought out the Axis forces and in a determined counterattack recovered most of the ground which had been lost. At the end of the day the British line was intact.

Next day the weather was better and there was good observation. After the fighting of the day before neither side at first made any attacks. There was considerable artillery shelling. Both Axis and British prepared a minor attack to be launched late in the day.

The Axis attack started first, toward El Alamein, strongly supported. Although the British had the sun in their eyes to impede observation, their artillery was effective and the Axis advance was stopped.

In a short time the British attack was launched. There were really two: South African troops attacked from north of Alamein while Imperial forces attacked well south of that place, about 15 miles from the coast. Both attacks were pressed with great vigor. The artillery fired heavy barrages at a very high rate of fire, while the R.A.F. attacked enemy batteries and forward troops. The British broke into the Axis lines, capturing nearly 2,000 prisoners and 30 guns. Night ended the battle, which convinced Marshal Rommel that the British 8th Army was in a strong position.

During the next two days

the British continued to attack, making slight progress and capturing some more prisoners. Prisoners' statements indicated that they were exhausted; the reporting officers stated that they looked it. They had been short of food and water, and some badly wounded men were so tired that they fell asleep while on the operating table.

British headquarters was now of the belief that Rommel had advanced so far and so quickly that he was probably out of supplies and his men in no condition physically to support another severe battle. Maybe a strong British attack might overthrow him and reverse the strategical situation. In addition to the South African troops, some Indian troops (who were also seasoned veterans) returned from rest areas. It was decided to make a major attack next day, with a view of piercing the enemy's center.

On July 4th, South African and New Zealand troops attacked near the center, starting from southeast of El Alamein. Their immediate objective was a ridge several miles long extending east and west parallel to the direction of attack. An artillery and air preparation preceded the attack of armored troops, which in turn was followed by infantry. The enemy's advanced positions were overrun and about 600 German prisoners were captured; there was no time to collect these, and it subsequently turned out that the "prisoners" had in considerable part walked around the front back to their own lines.

Encouraged by their advance, the British renewed the attack on the following day. The offensive was extended



to the area around El Alamein. Visibility was good, and the artillery most active. Some of the British targets varied from 2,000 yards' range to as much as 20,000 yards for heavy 210-mm. guns. Notwithstanding all efforts, only minor progress was made. Consequently, believing in the enemy's assumed state of exhaustion, night attacks were ordered which were to be delivered soon after dark.

One of the night attacks was made by New Zealand troops, a Maori unit which entered and held an enemy strong point in a bayonet attack. They were later counterattacked by the Italian Pavia Division and lost a part of their gains during a severe fight under a fading moon.

This ended the British offensive; it had made some tactical gains, but had not succeeded in overthrowing the enemy. Both sides now settled down. The British revised their estimate as to the supposed stage of exhaustion of the Axis. New reports on prisoners taken showed that though the Germans were undoubtedly tired, they were well fed, clothed, and supplied. In lieu of water, they received regularly Italian mineral water with occasional issues of canned German beer. Their personal kits were models for desert warfare: each contained a substantial shelter tent, toilet articles, antiseptics, vitamin compounds, etc. The men were sturdy and their morale appeared to be good. Italian prisoners were reported to be also well kept and supplied, but seedy as to appearance. Their clothing was poor, and it was noted that their shoes were of all models and colors, presumably due to a shortage of leather in Italy. Italian morale was also reported good, the majority of prisoners, especially officers, apparently being genuinely convinced that the Axis was bound to win this war.

Under these circumstances it appeared to British GHQ that an immediate resumption of the offensive was not justified and would promise no substantial gain. Directions were given to intensify the air attacks against enemy transportation, particularly toward his fuel tank trucks. Incidentally, the Axis adopted the same tactical idea, so both sides now employed their air forces primarily in attacking each other's motor vehicles. Attacks were made by day and night, and led to an extraordinarily intensified air activity. Notwithstanding, the daily reports of air losses do not show any material increase, although both sides have claimed large successes against the other side's transportation. It is not at this time possible to verify these claims.

On the 10th the British made a local attack just west of El Alamein to improve the position in that sector. The objective was a low hill, Tel el-Eisa (Arabic for *Hill of Jesus*). Australians carried out this attack. At 3:30 AM combat patrols started out simultaneously with the commencement of a severe artillery preparation. At 5:00 o'clock the main attacking force jumped off; they reached their first objective within an hour and by 6:30 had the

entire hill in their hands. About 1,500 Italian prisoners were taken.

The success in the north was partly balanced by a similar Axis attack in the south. The Axis took this sector by surprise and made a small gain. Thereupon the artillery of both sides violently shelled the position recently lost to the enemy, but no counterattack developed: the main Axis and British forces which were opposite the center of the line were not engaged on this day.

On July 12th the Axis center just before sunset made a local attack, presumably to secure identifications. They captured an advance post, and having accomplished their mission then withdrew. For at least the next three weeks only local fighting occurred.

#### COMMENTS

Early in August the Axis has air bases within 100 miles of the great British naval base, Alexandria. Although the city has good anti-aircraft defenses, a new situation has arisen, since this is the first time that the enemy has been able to base his air forces so close. The British fleet has other anchorages in Palestine, Syria, and Cyprus, and fuel bases in Palestine and Syria—but it has no other repair establishments or large docks in the eastern Mediterranean. The Axis is now also inconveniently close, within medium bombing range, to the Suez Canal, and can now bomb this important artery from relatively close bases.

Should the Axis overcome the British in the desert where the fighting is now going on, they would soon arrive at the border of the Egyptian Delta, thickly settled and cultivated and crisscrossed with numerous rivers and canals. They would find an entirely different terrain from the desert.

In the desert, armored troops can operate rather freely across country. They can not do this so easily in the Delta, which is full of obstacles to cross country movement. It is an almost ideal country for delaying actions, provided the number of troops available are sufficient to cover the entire front and so prevent turning movements.

The Axis success in freeing Libya from the British, and pushing their front eastward about 400 miles within five weeks, while defeating what the British had announced was a superior army, may have some repercussion among the peoples of the Near East; this point was brought out by Mr. Churchill in his speech of July 2nd. To date it has only acted in confirming their intention not to join the cause of the United Nations. Their ultimate reaction can not yet be foretold.

The evidence now available indicates that Marshal Rommel's success was greater than he had expected and greater than German GHQ, 'way off in Russia, had believed to be possible. The consequence was that there were insufficient forces available to fully exploit the victory gained. Both sides are now engaged in reinforcing their North African front, the Axis with the hope of driving the British out of Egypt, and the British in the hope that reinforcements will arrive in time to enable them to drive the enemy completely out of Egypt.

The British sea line from the United States or Great Britain, around Africa, is roughly twenty times as long as that of the Axis from Italy to Libya. Both lines are subject to submarine attack by the enemy, and the Axis one is also subject to air attack. Both sides are short of shipping. If either side can build up a force which will be strong enough to carry out wide turning movements, the present stalemate may be changed. It could also be changed if either side accumulates the necessary artillery and armored forces for a direct frontal attack.